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ABSTRACT

This document describes a program designed for women and children living in homeless shelters to offer them creative, interactive experiences. The activities served to provide personal contact with the children and to read with them; help the families participate in creative expressions of self; and provide visits with the larger community. These experiences offered mothers and children a safe way to transform grief and anger into creative acts. Also, by bringing them out of the shelter and back into the community, they were given a means to help themselves transition back into a larger, livelier world. Despite efforts to sustain the program, it ended when the host university withdrew financial support. The concept remains a vital link between psychoanalysis, the arts, and the community. (JDM)

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Saturday Program for Mothers and Children Living in Shelters

In the Fall of 1989 the university museum that I directed began a Saturday program for mothers and children living in shelters. We operated over the next two years. Eventually, we served five shelters. The program was for residents in both longer term homeless and 30 day abuse shelters. There were no fathers. On any given Saturday, 40-70+ people-- mothers ages 14 through mid-30's, and children from several weeks to 18 years old-- participated.

By January 1990, we sought a psychoanalytically informed, contemporary program, for applied psychoanalysis moving away from the strict treatment model. The work of Anna Freud and others during World War II provided a beginning.

The goal of the Saturday Program was to guide successful experiences through well thought out and joyous cultural activities. We designed creative and interactive, rather than academic and competitive experiences for kids. We provided personal contact with the children, which consisted of: individual attention; encouraging talking; participation in creative expression of the self through dancing, singing, painting, crafts and use of computers, theater production--such as envisioning, writing, acting, directing and set design; reading with a volunteer; visits to the larger community and institutions of learning and culture; consistency through regular meeting times, place and staff; and focus on activities and attention that enhanced self-esteem and understanding.

Every week the program was managed by 5 museum staff members and 20 volunteers from the community. We gave the volunteers training each

Saturday during the one hour prior to the arrival of the children. We spelled out guidelines and responsibilities for the volunteers. This better acquainted them with our objectives and appropriate behavior.

First and foremost our volunteers were taught to be aware of mutuality with the children. Volunteers became keenly aware of attentive listening and eye contact; not coming late or leaving early, thereby exacerbating the children's already present feelings of abandonment; not playing with food or using it as an art activity since many children have gone hungry; not wearing suggestive clothes such as short shorts or tank tops or using improper language or behavior--for example, not cursing or attending with alcohol on their breath or drugs in their systems--since many children(and mothers) had been sexually and/or physically and emotionally abused.

We gave other more specific instructions regarding sharing clean-up, getting the children to help and teaching them how. We taught volunteers to perform the activity of the day and how to handle any conflicts. During the session the mother's and children gave us verbal feedback. At the end of the day we provided exit forms for volunteers asking a series of questions including soliciting ideas about how to better interact with the mothers and children. We asked volunteers how they felt and how things could be better for them. As well, we asked for the shelter staff's suggestions.

The program staff spent an additional hour considering from our view, how the day's program went and how we felt about it. Every week we adjusted the program according to what we had learned. During the first months, staff felt so tired and depressed by the end of each session we were not sure if we could continue. Clearly we were tired from all the work, but we were also taking in the

feelings of our visitors. Processing each person's feelings after every Saturday soon developed into a method that helped us to understand and go forward.

In transference-counter transference terms many feelings were raised and dealt with. For example, because shelters are temporary housing, we might see any individual child from one to several times. Only a very few did we see for months. Not knowing what happened to the children proved hard on staff and volunteer feelings. Mothers and children expressed the same fears. When they would first come they talked about their fears of not getting to come again or maybe we wouldn't be there. We noticed that we felt we were doing good for unfortunate others. This reduced our fears of becoming helpless and homeless. And, if we should, others would come to help us, not only for food and shelter but to lift our spirits.

We insisted that volunteers rotate because the feelings raised at the mothers and children's plight was overwhelming. When a child had a favorite volunteer and did not see that person the next week, that could raise attachment-abandonment issues which were already central. For that reason we made sure that each volunteer not spend the whole Saturday with just one child but move freely from activity to activity among all of the children.

Many of the children had not known their fathers and had little male influence. If their fathers were still involved in their lives, which was rare in our experience, they were not permitted to live in the shelters which were for women and children only. Even male teens, when they reached a certain age, had to go to all male shelters. It was often the lack of male support that left their mothers vulnerable and in need of shelters. We recruited male volunteers. One activity children seemed to crave was being lifted above the fray and carried on

a man's shoulders. We hoped that the program served as a representative of the larger community, a role that might have been served by a father.

Mothers were often drug or alcohol addicted and/or mentally ill. They were suffering. On the whole they provided poor parenting for their children. Some shelters provided parenting classes for the mothers. Shelters assumed the role of parent. Unfortunately, some shelters played the role of an abusive and exploiting parent. Shelters are businesses and employers. In order to maintain themselves, shelters work, consciously or unconsciously, to keep mothers dependent or dysfunctional. The other side is that the mothers are often difficult to work with. Their desperate wish for autonomy and inadequate skills, place them in conflict with shelter staff.

It has been noted by Liebman and Abell in "A Psychoanalytic Reconsideration of Fatherhood," in the Winter 2000 issue of Psychoanalytic Psychology that "...fathers stand outside of the maternal orbit and offer children a neutral space in which rage can be exhibited with less fear of retribution."(p. 93) I would add color by changing the idea of "neutral space" to "another" space. The Saturday Program offered an opportunity outside the mothering/shelter system. We offered another space, a safe place, to transform grief and anger into creative acts.

Museum staff and volunteers received training that alerted them to how hard it is not to have a home, to live in cubby hole or corner of a teeming, thronging shelter, to have no present father, often with depressed, mentally ill or drug or alcohol addicted mothers. As in psychotherapy supervision, volunteers were asked to bring upsetting or confusing exchanges with the children to the staff. Staff interacted with volunteers continuously throughout

the day to offer such help.

We developed a schedule and structure for activities, along with the list of 100 volunteers. We did not advertise in the media for volunteers so we would have better control of who was presenting themselves to a group of children. Often the mothers and children had been sexually abused and could unwittingly induce such behavior in others. For that reason, I assigned a portion of one museum staff member's time to select, monitor and coordinate the volunteers.

While we had about 100 volunteers on our roster, we used the services of only 20 each week. They included a psychiatrist; specialists in reading, theater, dance, vocal performance and visual arts, an elementary school teacher, a business man, several former shelter residents and numerous student volunteers from nearby universities. We enlisted community groups such as Women Against Abuse, The Salvation Army, Sojourner House, the then Mayor's Council on the Homeless, Herman Wrice's Anti Drug Network and the Archeological and Anthropological Museum of the University of Pennsylvania, to support the program.

The staff, along with experts, designed the program to stimulate a sense of empowerment, self worth and respect for self and others. We stressed exploring options and alternatives, as well as creative capabilities. The activities were designed to engage the participants imagination, dissipate anger and frustration and encourage new ways of thinking about themselves and acting on those thoughts.

Our program ventured into more unusual territory, often with stunning results. Children made puppets and gave performances to express their feelings. They created murals. They wrote and staged their own plays. Every activity

was designed to be completed in that one day in case the child did not return the next week. For infants and toddlers the program provided a simple yet critical essential: a quiet, safe place to sleep. Since shelters are so noisy for the infants and toddlers we arranged a quiet room with pads and blankets for them to sleep on or read and draw or color peacefully with a volunteer.

Children in shelters do not have pictures of themselves or their families. We offered polaroid cameras so the kids could take each others pictures and have the results immediately. Participants went to the computer center and learned to use the machines and reproduced the photos. Photography was an especially important tool through which the children began to see themselves.

We had some programs that we were not sure about. One was an opera singer who sang German lieder accompanied by a pianist. Our fears that this might be boring were allayed when everyone listened intently. Just the plaintive sound of the singer's wail brought some teenage boys to tears and encouraged a mother to sing with her own beautiful voice.

Another week a dance company taught lines of children a routine that ended with a breathtaking performance. The program's focus expanded too. Thanks to funding from then Governor Casey's Pennfree Drug Program, we incorporated a drug prevention component. That added to our efforts of developing self esteem and keeping the children aware of options.

We sought and received funding from many corporations, foundations, state and local agencies(arts and social services), and individuals.

What drove us to participate every Saturday for two years(including all holidays) was that some children in our city had no homes. They often roamed the streets or moved from one unsavory place to another. These kids had been

left out of schools. Most had no sense of belonging anywhere. We understood the shelters provided only a transitional solution for the children.

While we couldn't solve the homeless problem, we knew we could give shelter residents an invitation back into the greater community. Our commitment was to bring the children out of the shelters, to welcome them into a larger, livelier world not to take a few activities into the smaller, depressing world of shelters. Success was confirmed when the children would sing out, "We're going to college today."

As successful as the Saturday Program was, we learned that our desire and even the sustained efforts of a broad cross-section of the community was not enough. When our parent, the university, decided to close the museum, the Saturday Program ended. Like the mothers and children we served, the Saturday Program needed a stable home in which to thrive. While we found later a new home, without at least some paid staff to organize things, the volunteers mirrored the chaos of the homeless mothers and children. The program broke down and disintegrated. We felt bereft.

We originally intended the Saturday Program for replication by other cultural institutions adapted to each specific organization's strengths and weaknesses. For example, an orchestra might bring mothers and children out of the shelter to musical events and rehearsals with forays into other aspects of its activities like how to make music with an instrument. A theater group might experiment with plays by helping the kids seek adventures in all the components of making stage sets and costumes and preparing for and presenting productions.

Our dream was that, in addition to the shelters, cultural organizations of all sizes would see, hear, understand and include the mothers and children. We

hoped to stimulate a wide network not only for their survival but also their thriving. For that reason the Saturday Program was included in the American Association of Museums' publication on volunteer programs.

Despite the museum's closing in 1991, I still receive inquiries about the Saturday program. It remains a good idea--and a vital link among psychoanalysis, the arts and the community.

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